

Message Status

DAVID SHRAUGER

Sam awoke with a smile, just like he did every day.

He brushed his teeth with a smile, tied his tie with a grin, and drank his morning cup of Joe through a smirk.

He had spent a good part of the night writing love letters. Introductions to the ladies of a website for the lovelorn, complete with its own iPhone app for quick, discreet meets. He preferred to write letters, as he called them. Actually taking the time to communicate rather than deciding to press the little star intended to let women know that you dig them.

Not that it did him any good. The message status was always the same.

“Unread Deleted.”

He checked another

“Unread Deleted.”

Still having hope, he checked a third.

“Unread Deleted,” read the message status.

If he was disappointed, his smile didn’t show it.

He closed the app with a swipe of his thumb and put the smartphone in his pocket. Love.com would have to wait because it was time for work.

Tightening the knot on his tie, he walked to his car at a brisk pace. It was a late-model sedan, hardly the kind of car he had dreamed of, but it got good gas mileage. His job called for him to burn almost as much tire rubber as it did shoe leather.

“So where is my first stop?” he thought aloud. He found himself doing that more and more as the years went on.

The itinerary called for him to drive to the east side today. Issaquah. Traffic on I-90 was going to be murder. He tucked his smartphone into its Bluetooth mount and switched to its GPS app. He knew the way until he got off the interstate, but Issaquah only seemed to have three roads and none of them went anywhere. He didn’t want to be driving in circles.

He was predictably stuck in traffic on Madison when he got his first phone call of the day. If today was like any other day, it wouldn’t be the last.

“Hi, Henry,” he answered.

“Sam. What’s the status on Walden?”

“I’m in route on Walden.”

“Menendez?”

“I’ve got him on my itinerary. Is he a priority?”

“His date is coming up. I want it done.”

“Roger that.”

If there was one thing that Sam could do, it was take an order. If his time in uniform had taught him nothing else, it taught him that.

“Just get them both done today. Farmer and Brown aren’t going to be nearly as easy. Philippa is already sitting on Walden, so hurry up. He gets antsy when he’s kept waiting.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Well, at least now Sam had something to look forward to at the end of the drive.

He managed to fight his way through the I-90 in record time. Just under an hour.

"Took you long enough," Philippa said when he got out of the car.

"Just long enough," Sam said through his smile.

"You're in luck. The guy just stepped out of the office for an early lunch. Great to be in the 1%, huh? One of our guys got thrown out of his office yesterday."

"Don't worry. You know I always get them."

Philippa laughed at that. "Yes, you do."

Sam and Philippa went in separately. Sometimes he felt bad for the guy, ambushing him in the middle of lunch; but by the time they called in Sam, they had already tried everything else. Philippa took a table at the bar, mere feet from the man in the picture. Sam wouldn't even bother with that pretense.

He walked through the restaurant, ignoring the few people who gawked at him as he went by. There were always a couple. Walden was at a table with two other men with depressingly similar taste in suits. He walked right up to the man's table and looked him in the eye.

Walden, like everybody, looked at his smile.

"Theodore Walden?" he asked, knowing the answer, but the niceties had to be observed.

"Yes?" Walden stammered.

"You've been served," Sam said, pulling the envelope out of his coat and dropping it in the salad.

"Witnessed," Philippa said.

Walden began stammering, but Sam didn't give a shit. He executed an about face and marched on out. His job was done. Philippa followed, but unlike Sam, she was holding her hand under her nose to hold in a giggle.

"Never fails," Philippa said when they got to their cars. "They always possum up the second they see you."

Filly always had a country-fried way of putting things. He ran his hand through his bristly crew cut and shook his head a little, but his smile was going nowhere.

"Just lucky I guess, like you said."

His phone chimed. Another message on the app.

"Unread Deleted," the message status read.

"You know...you don't have to use those stupid sites. I have some friends who would..."

"That's my business."

"But there are people who understand...what you did in the war..."

"Philippa. It's my business," Sam said in a tone that would never come with a smile.

"Fine."

As he drove away, he regretted snapping at her, but he didn't discuss personal matters with anyone, ever.

According to his itinerary, Menendez worked at a software firm in Bellevue. At least it wasn't a long drive. He was curious to see that he was the first to attempt to serve him. That hardly ever happened.

He called Henry.

"Menendez doesn't look like a dodger," Sam said. "What's the story?"

"No story. Everybody else was busy."

"Yeah."

"That doesn't sound like you believe me."

"Doesn't matter. I'm the only one who will do it, huh?"

"That's right."

"Then that's all I need to know."

As a process server, Sam had learned that every service was different. Most were bankruptcy, lawsuits, and small-claims bullshit. Other ones didn't go down so easy.

When he arrived in Bellevue, Paul was whistling, leaning up against his car.

"What was the rush? Don't you know I get paid by the hour?"

Sam genuinely laughed at that. A retired cop like Paul would be content to sit in his car all day eating doughnuts.

"It was a short drive. What's the scoop?"

"Easy as pie. Guy's a security guard. Works the front desk."

Fish in a barrel. That confirmed his suspicions.

"Let's get this over with."

As they walked into the front lobby, he saw a lone dark-haired man working the desk. The man stood up as they approached, picking up a clipboard.

Sam sized him up. Couldn't help it. The guy was well over six foot, nasty scar on his neck, U.S. Marines pin on his uniform. Most of all, he had a pistol on his hip.

He looked at the smile, like everybody else, but his expression was different. That made this a little harder.

"John Menendez?"

"That's me."

"You've been served."

"Witnessed," Paul said.

They walked away, through a lobby that was suddenly inconveniently long. In its echo chamber he could hear the envelope being torn open. Then he could hear the sobs.

"Divorce papers," Paul said as the door closed behind them. "Some cry; some laugh."

Sam just smiled.

"Where do you think the old lady is? Mom's house? Battered woman's shelter? In Barbados trying to break the dick-sucking record?"

"Doesn't matter."

"You know what, Sam? I've never met a harder guy to get a laugh out of. Lighten up."

As he walked away, Sam's iPhone chimed again. He had another message status update.

"Read Deleted."

"Well, that's progress."

He sat down in his car and checked out the next stop on his itinerary when the sound of the gunshot made him flinch. He turned to the building and waited a moment. Only one shot. He was certain what that meant. The sound instantly brought back the feelings of the round ripping through his face; what a surprise it had been. In one cheek and out the other. Knocked out his wisdom teeth. One inch lower and it would have blown out his tongue. The doctors did everything they could, but they called it a Glasgow smile. The muscles were just gone and would never come back. One inch higher and he wouldn't have come back.

He looked in the rearview mirror to straighten his tie. Sometimes, when the mirror just caught the bottom half of his face, it really did look like he was smiling. It was the eyes that gave him away. □